

By Stella Degenhardt



The Mountaineers

Pioneers of Recreational Skiing in the Pacific Northwest

The beginnings of skiing as an organized sport in the Pacific Northwest can be traced to the appearance of a single pair of skis on a winter outing organized in 1912 by the Mountaineers' Tacoma branch. Fifty men and women traveled by train to Ashford and walked or showshoed the snowy miles to Longmire Inn in Mount Rainier National Park. Their aim was simply to enjoy a weekend of hiking, tobogganing, and sliding in the snow. Olive Rand, the person who carried the skis, introduced the sport to a few Mountaineer friends and saw it spread until thousands of enthusiasts now turn out each weekend to enjoy the sport.

At first, skis were not universally welcomed on Mountaineers' trips. Some old-timers derided them as being inferior to snowshoes, and some trip leaders required all participants to come equipped with snowshoes—even refusing to accept responsibility for any member appearing on skis. Over the next several years, however, skis became the choice of many Mountaineers for winter hiking, and skiing became the club's premier winter activity.

The skis were often homemade, and information on downhill skiing techniques was hard to come by. Fastening the solid wooden skis to their climbing boots with leather toe loops and long ankle thongs, enthusiasts labored up the lengthy slopes for the thrill of the run down.

As many as 180 members attended these early two- to five-day outings to Mount Rainier. For the first four winters, they stayed at Longmire Inn, making day climbs to Paradise and higher points. They were the only people then known to visit Paradise in winter.

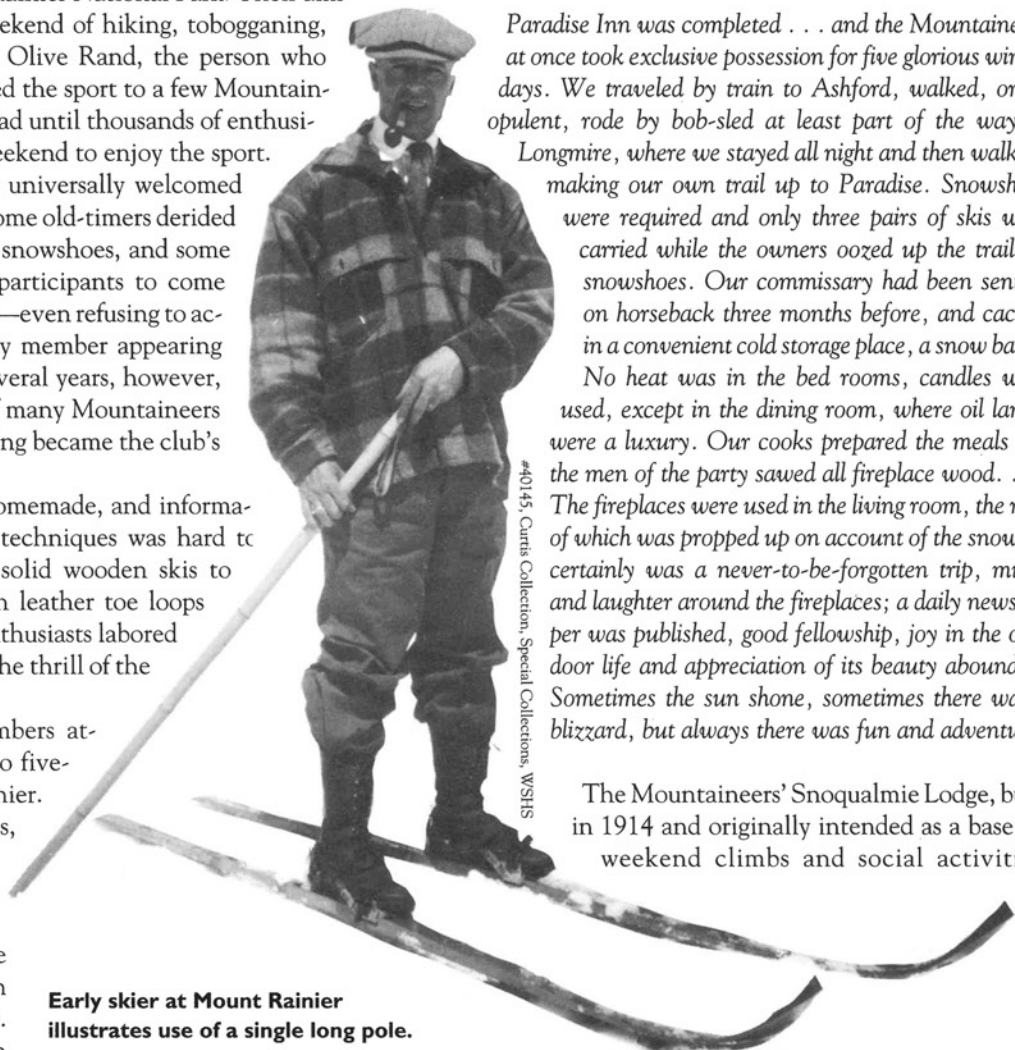
Even after Paradise Inn

was completed in 1917, it was open only during the summer. The Mountaineers rented space for their winter outings with the understanding that they would be responsible for their own food and heat.

L. A. Nelson, an early skier and mountain climber who joined the Mountaineers in 1907, wrote of these trips:

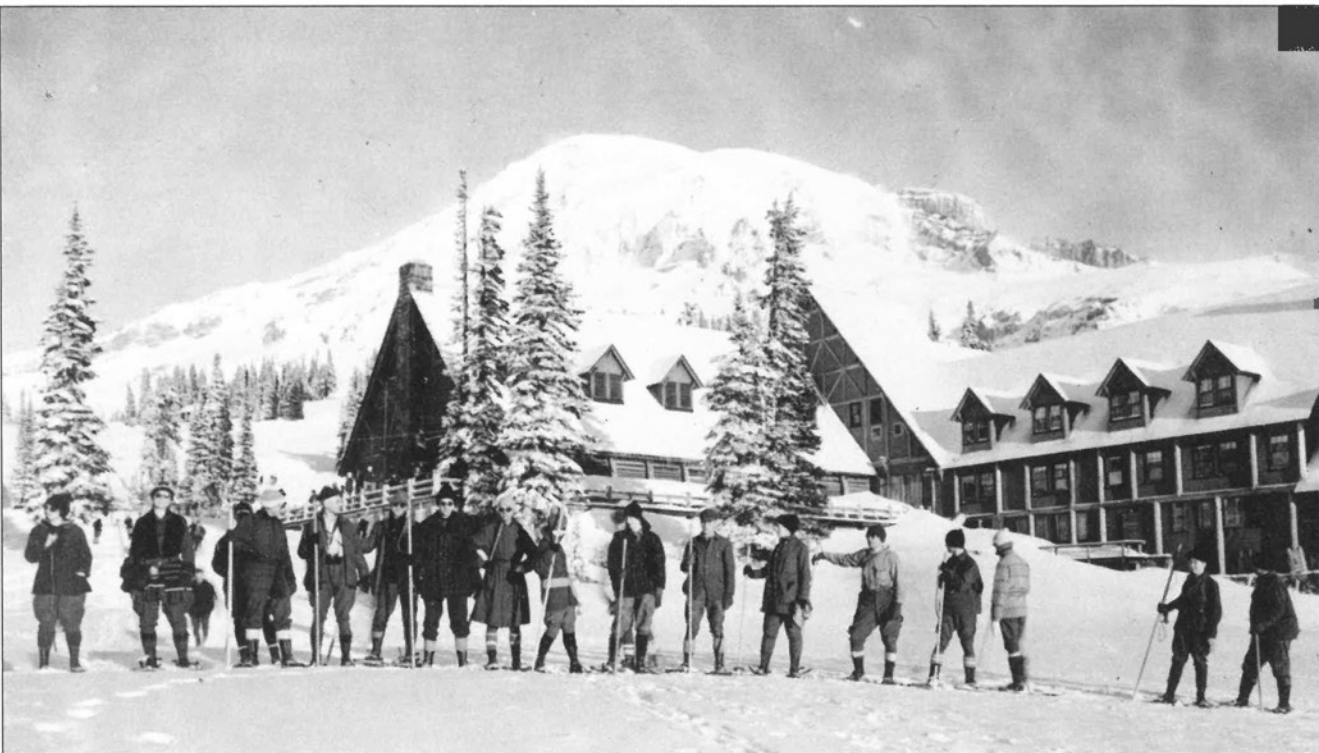
Paradise Inn was completed . . . and the Mountaineers at once took exclusive possession for five glorious winter days. We traveled by train to Ashford, walked, or, if opulent, rode by bob-sled at least part of the way to Longmire, where we stayed all night and then walked, making our own trail up to Paradise. Snowshoes were required and only three pairs of skis were carried while the owners oozed up the trail on snowshoes. Our commissary had been sent in on horseback three months before, and cached in a convenient cold storage place, a snow bank. No heat was in the bed rooms, candles were used, except in the dining room, where oil lamps were a luxury. Our cooks prepared the meals but the men of the party sawed all fireplace wood. . . . The fireplaces were used in the living room, the roof of which was propped up on account of the snow. It certainly was a never-to-be-forgotten trip, music and laughter around the fireplaces; a daily newspaper was published, good fellowship, joy in the outdoor life and appreciation of its beauty abounded. Sometimes the sun shone, sometimes there was a blizzard, but always there was fun and adventure.

The Mountaineers' Snoqualmie Lodge, built in 1914 and originally intended as a base for weekend climbs and social activities,



Early skier at Mount Rainier illustrates use of a single long pole.

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quickly became the focus for club ski activities.

Those were the days, according to an early skier, “when we ‘herring-boned up’ and ‘ran it straight.’” Paraffin applied to the base of the ski with a hot iron was considered the ultimate for either uphill climbing or downhill running. Ski poles were definitely “for the use of the weak and unfit.”

By 1915 Thor Bisgaard, Tacoma Mountaineer and an experienced ski runner, was offering instructions, and soon his star pupil, Norman W. “Norm” Engle, also of Tacoma, was helping instruct. Meanwhile, at Snoqualmie Lodge, veteran Swiss skier Rudy Amsler taught the Seattle group the fine art of telemarks and christianas. Skiing, which was “destined to expand the Mountaineer membership and all Northwest recreation into almost fantastic growth,” was booming.

Starting in 1922, annual ski competitions were organized at Snoqualmie Lodge, and for roughly the next 20 years Mountaineer teams competed, often successfully, with those of other outdoor clubs and the University of Washington.

Meany Ski Hut, the third Mountaineer cabin and the first dedicated to skiing, was ready for use by the winter of 1928. It was situated a mile and a half east of Stampede Pass, and Mountaineers reveled in the area’s favorable terrain and easy access by train. Cleared areas around the weather station and under the power line, as well as the open timber slopes, were favorite places—all ideally suited to ski touring, which then dominated the sport.

Each weekend during the snow season parties set out to enjoy the winter wilderness. The 1932 Mountaineer annual lists 21 destinations for “ski excursions” from Snoqualmie Lodge and 16 from Meany Ski Hut. From 1930 to the winter of 1941 the club sponsored the most unusual ski event of

Recreationalists enjoying spring snow pose with alpenstocks in front of Paradise Inn in Mount Rainier National Park, c. 1920.

all—the popular Patrol Race, from Snoqualmie Lodge over a rough, 18-mile course.

Mountaineer skiers did not restrict outings to the areas around their cabins. At Mount Rainier trips were made to Indian Henry’s Hunting Ground, the saddle of Pinnacle Peak in the Tatoosh Range, to Anvil Rock and Camp Muir, and down the Nisqually Glacier to its snout. Skiers went from Starbo Cabin in Glacier Basin to St. Elmo Pass and Curtis Ridge. In the Mount Baker area skiers went to Table Mountain, Shuksan Arm, Lake Ann, Kulshan Ridge, Coleman Glacier, and the Chain Lakes.

O. Phillip Dickert, a Mountaineer climber, skier and photographer, recalled that in the 1930s area skiers flocked to Mount Rainier. Dickert said:

The Park Service accepted skiing and plowed the road as far as Longmire and, later, to Narada Falls. We would carry the skis up and ski from Paradise back to the cars at Narada Falls—and sometimes people would ski all the way back to Longmire.

For the climb up, many used ‘skins’ (long strips of sealskin on the bottoms of the skis, or canvas tubes on the backs of the skis). But I preferred wax. Klister was the base wax which we applied at home, adding other waxes according to snow conditions. Waxing was quite an art and sometimes didn’t work perfectly.



Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

Eddie Bauer was alerted to the commercial potential of recreational skiing while on a Mountaineers' outing during the winter of 1920-21. His sports equipment stores were soon among the first Northwest retailers to feature ski equipment and clothing.

Individual Mountaineers were soon using skis for spring ascents of the mountains they climbed on foot during the summer. In May 1930 R. B. Sperlin, Ed Loners and John Booth performed a successful ski climb of Mount Baker. In following years Mount Rainier, Mount Adams and a number of other major mountains were climbed on skis, but these were typically by small parties of enthusiasts rather than scheduled Mountaineer trips.

Boots and clothing suitable for climbing were considered equally useful for skiing. Climbing boots, however, were generally fitted with tricouni nails, so skis were protected with a metal plate to reduce wear. Skiers pored over catalogs from Europe and ordered equipment to try out in the deep, often heavy snow of the Cascades.

On the Mountaineers' winter outing of 1920-21, Eddie Bauer, a Seattle outfitter and sports equipment retailer, realized the business opportunities that recreational skiing offered. Eddie Bauer stores soon stocked skis imported from Europe. Five years later they offered complete facilities for ski service and repair and had embarked on light manufacturing.

By 1924 local sports stores advertised skis as well as snowshoes (skis were much cheaper). Three years later the Out Door Store, on Seattle's First Avenue, advertised Norwegian

hickory skis and Northland skis in ash and hickory, together with ski bindings, poles and wax.

In 1930 Frederick & Nelson proclaimed that its golf shop was ready for the ski season. In 1933 the University Book Store advertised laminated hickory skis for \$7.50 a pair, and by 1935 laminated skis were being locally manufactured by Anderson Thompson.

As early as 1927 a Mountaineer Ski Committee was formed to assist in the development of skiing by offering instruction, organizing a series of tests, and sponsoring competitions. Chairman Ernest N. Harris saw the committee's aim as keeping the club in the position of prominence it occupied among skiing organizations of the Northwest.

A small group of Mountaineers was meeting to study technique and equipment. The group tested almost every article of equipment and clothing listed in the foreign catalogs and discussed its adaptability to Northwest conditions. Several of Seattle's "progressive" stores kept pace with this group and were "keenly interested in the results of their experiments."

During the 1930s Mountaineers Wally Burr, Ome Daiber, Hans Grage and Scott Osborn were among those developing ski equipment and clothing for Northwest skiers. Daiber's Tempo model of ski binding and his "pack-jacket" were especially appreciated. Daiber continued to test and manufacture outdoor equipment, and during World War II he served as a consultant to the U.S. Army on cold weather gear. Osborn was later one of the founding partners of Osborn and Ulland, a long-time Seattle sports store.

Metal "bear traps" replaced leather toe pieces, and heel cables were used to keep the boots firmly on the skis. Metal "guides" on the sides of the skis allowed the bindings to be loosened and the heels raised for climbing, but tightened to the skis for downhill control.

For climbing moderate slopes, a canvas sock was fitted over the tail of the ski, seal skins were strapped on, or wax was applied to the bottoms of the skis.

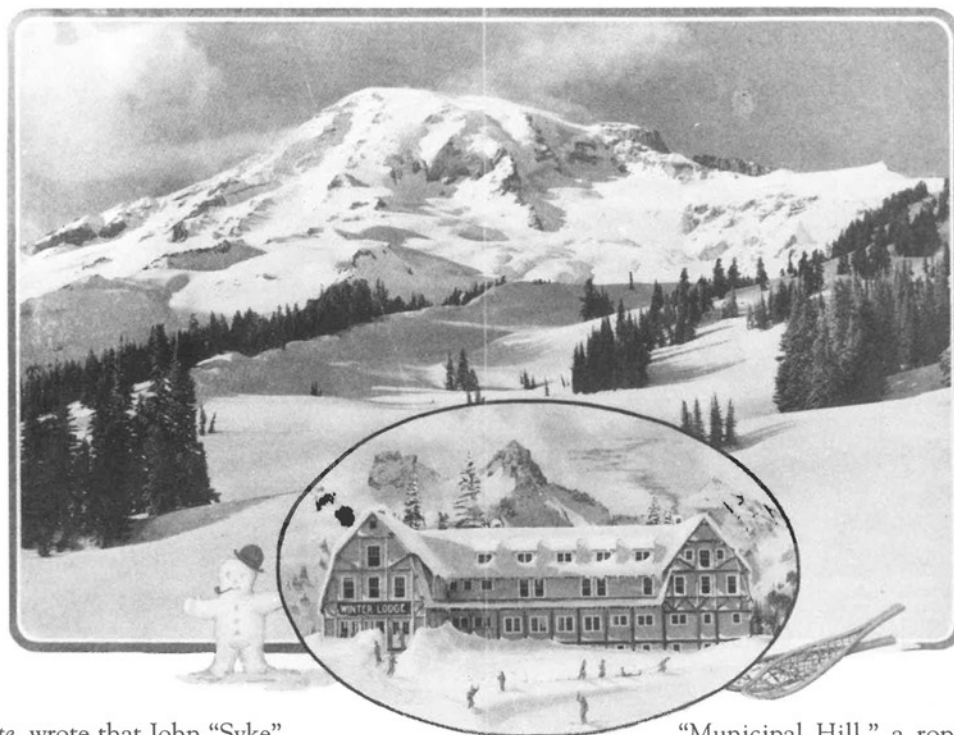
Joseph T. Hazard, a Seattle schoolteacher and a Mountaineer from 1911 until his death in 1965, noted that the Mountaineers' last winter outing to Paradise—from December 28, 1929, to January 1, 1930—ended an epoch, for by then the whole North-

From the mid 1930s, the Seattle Ski Club hosted thousands of weekend spectators who hiked from the Sunset Highway up to Beaver Lake to watch ski jumping competitions.



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Paradise Lodge, at the 5,500-foot level on Mount Rainier's south side. Built in 1930 a half mile west of Paradise Inn, it served a rapidly increasing number of tourists until 1946 when it was torn down and replaced by the present Visitor Center.



west was winter-recreation conscious and there were many resorts and "playfields."

For example, skiing began in the colder and drier snow east of Snoqualmie Pass in 1920 when eight Cle Elum residents became interested in the sport and formed a ski club. Yvonne Prater, in her book *Snoqualmie Pass: From Indian Trail to Interstate*, wrote that John "Syke" Breskow "served as president of the Cle Elum Ski Club for ten years, during which time Cle Elum was a skier's paradise. The community sponsored numerous events. Chartered trains came from Puget Sound and Yakima," bringing hundreds of people wanting to see or take part in the races, ski jumps, and special contests. Volunteers built a ski jump, and the Northern Pacific Railroad provided a tramway through a mine shaft to a good view of the jumping.

Skiing flourished in Cle Elum until the mid 1930s. When the highway over Snoqualmie was kept open year around, it provided easy access from Seattle to areas at the summit, and people went there instead of to Cle Elum.

Starting in the '30s, the Milwaukee Railroad ran special ski trains from Seattle to the Ski Bowl east of the pass at Hyak (now PacWest) for those skiers willing to sidestep or hike up the slopes. Later, a rope tow was built and the *Seattle Times* sponsored a ski school there. Hyak also included the largest jumping hill in the area.

At the Mountaineers' Meany Hut, John E. "Jack" Hossack, a Boeing engineer and noted mountain climber and skier, designed a rope tow that was built and operated by volunteers.

Seattle Ski Club members built their cabin above Snoqualmie Pass in 1929. In the mid 1930s thousands of spectators climbed up from the highway to Beaver Lake to watch ski-jumping contests sponsored by the club.

The Washington Alpine club, reorganized in 1923 from the cooperative hiking club, built a cabin near Snoqualmie Pass in 1931 to serve as a base for hiking and ski-mountaineering trips, later adding rope tows to serve downhill skiing.

The Seattle Parks Department logged a small slope at Snoqualmie Pass and in 1937, on what was known as

"Municipal Hill," a rope tow was installed. "The introduction of uphill transportation changed skiing overnight from a spectator sport to a participation sport for thousands," Kay Thoresen wrote in the 50th anniversary issue of *The I-90 Skier*, published in 1987. The first rope tow had "... grown into 20 chairlifts with a capacity load of 26,000 skiers per hour at Alpentail, Ski Acres and Snoqualmie."

Although Mountaineers enthusiastically embraced downhill skiing, there were always members whose first love was using skis to travel through the snow-covered back country and for winter ascents. In December 1941 the club's first ski mountaineering course was started under the chairmanship of Walter B. Little, a mountain climber and skier who later helped to locate Crystal Mountain Ski Area. A companion to the club's climbing course, ski mountaineering featured a mimeographed handbook prepared by club members. The course is still being offered, with annual adaptations for changes in equipment and technique.

The popularity of skis did not eradicate snowshoes from Mountaineer activities, and snowshoeing is alive and doing well, with the club sponsoring both a snowshoe training course and a full and varied program of trips. In the late 1920s a Mountaineer wrote:

Traditionally, the Mountaineers have been pioneers. First, by opening up mountain climbing exploration as a sport, they paved the way to enlarged enjoyment of similar activities by the public. Second, in penetrating Paradise Park in winter and year by year proving the practicability of such an outing, they created the groundwork for the later opening up of the Park



Special trains carried skiers from Seattle to the Milwaukee Ski Bowl, east of Snoqualmie Pass. For several years, until the first rope tow was built, skiers had to be willing to sidestep to the top of a slope before enjoying an exciting run down.

to winter tourists.

Now, rightfully, our organization assumes and recognizes its leadership in a third field, skiing. . . .

In 1936 another member noted:

Some years ago . . . practically everything the Mountaineers did on skis was unique in this region and made Pacific Northwest ski history. . . . Where once Mountaineers made their weary way to Paradise and Baker, they now can ride on cleared roads to the doors of the lodges. . . . Once the Mountaineer Ski Annual was alone in its field—now we have special twenty page newspaper supplements, practically daily coverage on the sports page throughout the winter and several magazines devoted solely to our skiing. Some will remember when we pleaded with sporting-goods stores to import just a few of the ski specialties we desired.

The Mountaineers “wrote the book,” both figuratively and literally, on organized cross-country skiing as a sport in the Pacific Northwest. The club published six volumes on the sport during the years 1979 to 1983 and continues to produce updated editions describing ski tour routes and skiing and safety techniques. Today “cross-country,” “nordic” or “ski mountaineering” remain the first love of many skiers. Hundreds of enthusiasts strap on their “skinny skis” while the lines at the chair lifts grow ever longer.

The Mountaineers Backcountry Skiing Program includes courses in basic techniques for efficient travel over snow, telemark skiing, ski mountaineering, glacier travel and crevasse rescue. It also offers a winter-long program of trips led by experienced volunteers and any winter or spring weekend may see a party setting out on skis to explore the snowy wilderness just as the Mountaineers did in the second and third decades of this century.

Stella Degenhardt, a Seattle resident and a member of the Mountaineers for over 40 years, presently chairs the organization’s History Committee. This article is excerpted from material being gathered for a forthcoming book on the history of the Mountaineers.



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FRONT COVER: Chromolithographed calendar printed in New York and overprinted by the local Tacoma agent. The Washington State Historical Society's research collections began with a significant assemblage of ephemera and newspapers gathered by the Society's second director, Edward N. Fuller. Fuller collected broadsides, flyers, handbills, programs and other ephemera, including this 1886 calendar. See related story beginning on page 11. BACK COVER: Cross-country skiing at Summerland in Mount Rainier National Park, 1959. (Courtesy of the Mountaineers) See related story beginning on page 6.